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Bridging civilisations, guarding identity: Malaysia's role in China's Global Civilisation Initiative

WHEN China's President Xi Jinping launched the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI) in 2023, it marked a new chapter in diplomacy, an effort to promote cultural diversity, mutual learning and civilisational dialogue.

For China, the GCI showcases its soft power as an alternative to Western narratives. For Malaysia, a multicultural nation with deep historical ties to China, the initiative offers opportunities but also strategic challenges.

Scholarships, youth exchanges and visa-free travel promise tangible gains, yet Malaysia must ask: how can these be harnessed without compromising sovereignty or eroding national identity?

Opportunities and benefits

The GCI appeals strongly to Malaysia. A significant number of Malaysian students have received Chinese scholarships, broadening their exposure to languages, technologies and cross-cultural perspectives that enrich the nation's human capital.

Tourism has also revived since visa-free entry was introduced in 2023. Chinese visitors have returned in large numbers, boosting local businesses, while Malaysians themselves are exploring China with greater ease.

Diplomatically, participation in GCI enhances trust with Beijing, complementing existing economic ties under Belt and Road projects.

Cultural exchange thus becomes a softer, people-centred foundation for cooperation.

Risks of cultural imbalance

Yet, soft power is seldom neutral. Malaysia's strength lies in the coexistence of Malays, Chinese, Indians, and indigenous groups. If GCI initiatives are perceived as disproportionately highlighting Chinese culture, they may disrupt this delicate equilibrium.

At the political level, China's GCI promotes a worldview emphasising sovereignty and civilisational respect, implicitly challenging Western liberal norms.

If Malaysia aligns too closely, it risks narrowing its foreign policy space and weakening its role as a balancer between global powers. Furthermore,

cultural diplomacy often intertwines with economic leverage; scholarships, tourism flows, or cultural investments could evolve into subtle dependencies.

A refined statement is: "Cultural initiatives frequently intersect with economic strategies, making it difficult to separate symbolic gestures from material influence."

Malaysia's strategy of balance

Malaysia has responded with balance, reciprocity and diversification. Cultural exchange is framed as two-way: while China promotes calligraphy, Confucian values and festivals, Malaysia actively projects its own traditions abroad.

Batik exhibitions, halal collaborations and Malaysian festivals in major Chinese cities assert national identity. Embedding dialogues within Asean-

China frameworks also prevents excessive bilateral dependence, positioning Malaysia as part of a collective voice rather than a single partner vulnerable to pressure.

Malaysia's multilateral engagement

Malaysia's active participation in multilateral platforms further reinforces this balancing strategy. Within Asean, the grouping has consistently championed cultural, educational and economic cooperation that ensures regional voices carry weight in dialogue with major powers. Beyond Asean, Malaysia contributes to global platforms such as Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec), the United Nations and the Commonwealth, projecting itself as a constructive bridge between East and West.

These multilateral engagements complement its bilateral ties with China by broadening diplomatic space, diversifying partnerships and enhancing Malaysia's visibility as a principled, moderate voice in international affairs.

Selective engagement further safeguards sovereignty. Malaysia welcomes practical benefits such as student programmes, tourism and cultural events while filtering ideological content.

Policies remain rooted in the Rukun Negara, Islamic values, and the multicultural ethos. At the same time, Malaysia diversifies its external ties, deepening relations with the United States, Japan, the European Union and the Middle East.

This web of connections ensures that no single power dominates Malaysia's cultural or diplomatic landscape.

Tourism as a soft power arena

The visa-free arrangement illustrates this balancing act. While the influx of tourists strengthens ties, Malaysia has reframed the narrative to highlight its own multicultural identity.

Tourism Malaysia campaigns emphasise Islamic heritage, indigenous traditions and ethnic festivals. By showcasing national diversity, Malaysia ensures that openness does not equate to cultural subordination. Engagement is therefore conducted on Malaysian terms.

Long-term capacity building

Beyond short-term benefits, GCI-related exchanges contribute to Malaysia's long-term capacity building. Students who study in China return with new skills, networks, and global perspectives, enhancing Malaysia's pool of talent.

Retaining these graduates within Malaysia's workforce can strengthen industries ranging from technology to education. Cultural diplomacy also

stimulates innovation by exposing Malaysians to alternative models of governance, research and creativity, which can be adapted to local contexts.

Over time, such exchanges reinforce Malaysia's ambition to position itself as a regional education hub. By welcoming foreign students and

reintegrating returning graduates, Malaysia strengthens its image as a knowledge-based economy that is attractive to international collaborations.

The interplay of talent retention, innovation and educational leadership not only boosts competitiveness but also safeguards sovereignty by reducing reliance on any single partner.

Future safeguards and recommendations

To maximise gains while mitigating risks, Malaysia may consider strengthening institutional safeguards to ensure that foreign cultural initiatives complement national unity objectives. It could also expand Malaysian cultural diplomacy by establishing more cultural centres in China and beyond, thereby projecting influence actively.

In addition, empowering youth as cultural ambassadors would transform students into agents of exchange rather than passive recipients.

Investment in independent research through universities and think tanks is equally important, as it would provide policymakers with critical insights into the long-term implications of the GCI.

Conclusion

The GCI presents Malaysia with both promise and challenge. Opportunities abound in youth empowerment, tourism growth and strengthened bilateral trust, while the risks lie in cultural imbalance and political dependency.

Malaysia has so far navigated this terrain with pragmatism, embracing exchange while asserting identity, leveraging Asean multilateralism, and maintaining diverse global partnerships.

The true measure of success will not lie in the number of Malaysian students pursuing scholarships in Beijing or the influx of Chinese tourists in Kuala Lumpur.

Rather, it will be determined by Malaysia's ability to emerge from these exchanges with its sovereignty intact, its multicultural foundations reinforced, and its voice confidently shaping the discourse on civilisational dialogue.

In a world where influence may be subtle but sovereignty remains invaluable, Malaysia's balanced approach offers a potential model for other nations seeking to navigate the delicate dynamics of global soft power.

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